



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Charulata by Satyajit Ray

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defines their love), a truckload of sheep they travel with, a train that roars by a few feet from their hotel window; or, on their later trip, a hilarious sequence of their smuggling food and cheap wine into the luxurious chateau room where they are forced to spend the night. This sequence is outrageously quixotic, but with a saltiness in the details—their setting up a tent on top of their bed, to escape the mosquitoes—that keeps the daydream concrete. Donen must also be credited for the way in which Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney play *together* in these scenes; their fooling around, their affectionate teasing of each other is quite persuasive. Their love scenes—an erotic tickling bout, for example—look spontaneous, as if they really like each other. And you remember the images. A lovely short scene in which both of them, badly sunburned after a long day on the beach, survey themselves in a mirror and try to kiss without touching, exemplifies Donen's ability to find striking, funny visual expressions for the Love that Claude Lelouch handles with nothing but pink gauze.

I don't want to be perverse in allocating praise and blame, because the main achievement in *Two for the Road* is Raphael's—the conception is his, so is the pointed subversion of everlasting movie love. And Donen must be criticized for some of the failures, like the smug performance of William Daniels, who badly overplays the meticulous, gassy American husband. These scenes are labored satire, though they have their purpose; they define precisely, if negatively, what Mark and Joanna have in common. Donen muffs the ending of the film too. As I've noted, the fact that Mark and Joanna stay together is believable enough. But the jaunty tone is wrong; it makes the reconciliation seem too coy, too happy, too conclusive, in a way I don't think Raphael intended. Still, *Two for the Road* is the kind of outstanding kitsch that unnerves many people—it's more artful and imaginative than most Art films; it has to be taken seriously, *even though* it's entertaining and sometimes narcotic. *Two for the Road* is an occasionally sentimental, but incisive film lyric that cap-

tures the sadness and the vitality of what it is like to live without permanence, the radiance of love and the impossibility of love over time.

—STEPHEN FARBER.

CHARULATA

Written and directed by Satyajit Ray. Photography: Subrata Mitra. Based on a story by Rabindranath Tagore.

The story of *Charulata* takes place in nineteenth-century Bengal, the period of what is called "The Bengal Renaissance." Western thoughts of freedom and individuality are ruffling the age-old calm of a feudal society. *Charulata's* husband, suited, bearded, pince-nez-wearing Bhupati is inspired by the gospels of Mill and Bentham, by ideas of freedom and equality. He spends his feudal wealth and all his waking hours on the propagation of these through *The Sentinel*, an enterprise which is destined to flounder by the very fact of the single-minded idealism of its editor. But the winds of change are not only stirring him; unknown to herself, his good Hindu wife, conveniently childless, is no longer capable of treading the beaten path of the ideal woman who wants nothing of life but her husband's happiness. She longs for his company and is bored with his attempts to supply diversions in which he is himself not involved. One of these diversions is her husband's cousin, Amal, who is served to her on a platter by the trusting husband as her friend, philosopher, and guide. In him she finds one with whom she can share her thoughts and on whom she can bestow her affection. Slowly, unknowingly, the relationship turns into one of sexual love. When Amal realizes the nature of his feeling for her, he flees into marriage, and exile in England. Bhupati, who sees in her grief only an innocent affection, suddenly comes face to face with the truth when she breaks down on hearing of her beloved's marriage, unaware that her husband had come back into the room.

Tagore's short story finds the husband departing at the end to be the editor of a news-

paper a thousand miles away. Charu wants to go with him because she cannot bear the prospect of living with her memories in the desolation; he will not take her with him because the company of a wife who is constantly thinking of another will be too much of a cross to bear. He weakens when he sees her plight and offers to take her along; she reads his thoughts and decides to stay. Tagore thus ends on the symbol of a clear break. Ray, perhaps more realistically, freezes them to a state of eternally suspended animation.

The pattern of relationships within the traditional joint family in Bengal is often as complicated as within a whole society—particularly between men and women. Side by side with taboo relationships, there are others which are indulged by tradition up to somewhat vague boundaries of decorum. For a young wife, one of the husband's younger brothers (or cousins) would often turn out to be a special favorite and her relationship with him could well be one of mock love-play without attracting disapproval. The word in Sanskrit for husband's younger brother literally means "second husband"; on the other hand, there is no word for "cousin" in most Indian languages—they are all brothers. Ritualistically, therefore, the husband's younger brothers and cousins are vaguely placed in a sort of "second husband" position, ready to take his place, as it were, but never actually doing so. Even today, it is an ambiguous relationship, made up of brotherly affection often overlaid with tinges of sexuality.

It is in this context, and the context of the gradual liberation of woman from feudal slavery—in which Tagore played a very important part—that the content of Ray's *Charulata* is best understood. It is a context that Ray's film takes for granted for its Indian audience.

Ray had misgivings about the subject even while making the film. How would society take this probe into an area of unspoken internal adjustment-mechanisms? *Devi's* gentle pointer at the price of superstition had come to grief at the box office; if the Freudian undertones in the father-in-law's outlook on his son's wife had been understood, there might have been a

minor riot. Indeed there were murmurs on the release of *Charulata*; but they died down when Ray's triumph came in the enormous critical and box-office success of this film. As I was coming out of the theater, I saw a shrivelled old woman, barely able to walk with the help of two young men, wipe her eyes with the end of her sari. Some inner chord in her had been touched.

The secret of her identification with an otherwise uncomfortable theme lay in the state of innocence of the characters who enact the drama of *Charulata*. Their lack of conscious knowledge of what is happening inside them gives them a certain nobility of innocence; it is in their awakening that their tragedy lies. Amal, the younger man, is the first to realize the truth; for Charu it is an imperceptible movement from the unconscious to the conscious in which it is difficult to mark out the stages; for the husband, it is a sudden, stark, unbelievable revelation of truth. All three wake up, as it were, into the twentieth century, the age of self-consciousness. The rhythm of the unfolding is so gentle and true that there is no sense of shock even for the conservative Indian, although Ray's film is as daring for the wider audience as Tagore's story was for the intelligentsia of its day.

"Calm without; Fire within" was the title of an essay by Satyajit Ray in *Show* magazine, in which he found the distinguishing trait of oriental art in the "enormous reserves of power



CHARULATA

which never spilled over into emotional displays." I had returned from Europe the very day I went to see *Charulata* for the first time and still remember the shock of realizing how deep currents of sexual love can be conveyed without two people touching hands. Had Ray made a film about forbidden love which did "spill over into emotional displays," violent explorations of each other's personality through sex, not only would the Indian audience have rejected it, but the film would have lost much of the reserves of power held in check which it constantly suggests. It is the sudden breaking-out from this restraint which gives the scene of Charu's collapse on the bed on having news of Amal's marriage, with the impassive Bhupati dabbing his eyes with his handkerchief after he has witnessed his wife's grief, its emotional power.

The fire within smoulders most of all in Charu herself; she is the only one of the three who has no crisis of conscience. Bhupati feels guilty for not having devoted enough time to her, and blames himself more than others for his predicament; Amal realises that he was about to betray the trust of his cousin and benefactor and beats a hasty retreat. Charu alone never turns back on her passion. Her eyes are tranquil and without accent until the swing scene where she dimly senses within her, for the first time, the onrush of a forbidden love. Then suddenly, they go dark, and the pupils shine (a simple trick of make-up and lighting) like a tigress's. And a tigress she remains, albeit a chained one. In her reconciliation with her husband there is no sense of guilt, only a recognition of reality.

There is a passage in the Tagore story ("Nash-tanir" or Broken Home) which reads: "Perhaps Bhupati had the usual notion that the right to one's own wife's affection does not have to be acquired. The light of her love shines automatically, without fuel, and never goes out in the wind."

In words like these, which are interjected here and there in the story, Tagore sums up the condition of woman in a feudal society. Ray

had already touched upon it in *Mahanagar* (The Big City) and recorded the hesitant winds of change. In both films, the instrument of change is provided by an unthinking husband who takes his wife for granted and cannot see her as an individual. In *Mahanagar*, the instrument is the job which is to give Aroti a brief but lingering taste of economic independence; in *Charulata*, it is the cousin (brother) who opens Charulata's young mind not only to the joys of literature, but to those of a youthful companionship which she cannot have with her husband. In both, the husbands are theoretically modern but in practice unable to foresee the consequences of their action in disturbing the status quo of their homes—so preoccupied are they with the man's world. Of woman's new urge for a happiness of her own making, both are blissfully unaware. The position is re-stated more weakly in *Kapurush* (The Coward) which could well have been called "Charulata Revisited." It finally freezes her in her condition of awareness of freedom which she cannot have—freedom to earn her own living, to love, and to be somebody in her own right. It is through her failure to achieve these things, in a society which has still not changed enough, that we become aware of woman's urge towards them. Although the development is not precisely that of a trilogy, the three films do hang together, and have a substance which Ray's films lying between the Apu trilogy and the three essays on woman do not have (nor does the film that follows them—*Nayak*, The Hero).

It is in *Charulata* that both the statement and the art reach their height. For the first time since the trilogy, Ray has something different and important to say, and says it really well. It is, to me, his masterpiece since the trilogy. In a classically Indian fusion of decoration and expression, its miniature-painting-like images acquire an autonomy and poise. Its rhythm, gentle as in all Ray's films, never falters, and Ray's own musical score, competent and interesting in previous films, for the first time becomes a major instrument in making the statement of his film. Its title theme (variations on which recur in the film) is derived from the melody of a com-

position by Tagore. The words of the song are so apt for suggesting the restlessness in Charu's mind that one would think it was the words which made Ray think of this particular derivation. (Incidentally, Tagore wrote some 3000 songs and for most of them composed the tunes himself). Another musical motif in the film is taken from a Scottish tune which Tagore had earlier used as the basis for a song sung in the film by Amal and Charu together. It is the first Tagore motif that makes the predominant impression, as memorably as the folk theme of *Pather Panchali*.

The exquisite period flavor is Ray's own, and distinguishes the film from the story, in which Tagore takes it for granted. The sunlit garden, the swing, the embroidery, the floral motifs on the doors and the walls, the horse-drawn carriage, the evocative settings created by Bansilal Chandra Gupta are, however, more than exquisite decorations; they frame the action and set it at a distance—the distance of contemplation.

—CHIDANANDA DAS GUPTA

THE WAR GAME

Directed and written by Peter Watkins. Photography: Peter Bartlett. Editing: Michael Bradsell. 50 mins.

Hopeless? Perhaps not, but a random survey of people on the street about the taboo topic of nuclear war would give us scant reason for hope. People have been anesthetized by years of silence imposed both from without, through the official pronouncements of government and mass media, and from within, from our unwillingness to accept and carry to their logical conclusion facts and events which we know to be true. What Peter Watkins, director of *The War Game*, is trying to do is to break this silence. The BBC, for whom the picture was made, has insured that his break be no more than a crack by refusing to allow it to be seen on television. Perhaps now that the film has won an Academy Award, the BBC's opinion of public tolerance for unpleasant facts will change.

Certainly, it is a disturbing film. It is not fatalistic nor does it advocate a course of action. It merely projects a possible train of events which would lead to a nuclear war, and the probable aftermath.

As a motorcycle policeman drives up to the police headquarters of a small town in Kent, we are filled in with the details of the international crisis; the Chinese have invaded South Vietnam, Russia and East Germany have blocked access to West Berlin. The American attempt to break through to Berlin with ground forces has been overwhelmed, and, in accordance with NATO policy, America has retaliated with tactical nuclear missiles. Russia is left with no alternative but to release bombs on Western Europe and Great Britain. The warning time for Britain will be at most two and a half minutes. The message that the policeman is bringing to the town in Kent, is the announcement of the arrival of evacuees from large target areas, who will be compulsorily billeted with families there. The reception is cool. "Are they colored?" asks a Kent housewife. Profiteering is rife among those who sell civil defense equipment; a typical citizen finds that he can afford only eight sandbags and six planks.

Then the siren wails, and the scramble for shelter begins. In a household which cannot afford a shelter, tables are uprighted in front of the windows. A child alone in a field is blinded by a bomb burst twenty-seven miles away. A house is shaken and curtains catch fire forty miles away. Throughout, the bland voice of the narrator runs on, fact after fact of devastating probability. We return again and again to street interviews. "Is war inevitable?" "If we are bombed, should we retaliate in kind?" The answers are predictable, and frightening. A fire storm is started, and we see people sucked into it like dry leaves before the 100-mile-an-hour winds. A doctor places his patients in three categories—those in the third category being left to die without the benefit of drugs. "Some of these people are just falling apart," says a nurse. We are read a proposed menu by the civil defense department which includes braised steak, apple pie and custard, and then cut to